

The ultimate mystery in philosophy & metaphysics

Going beyond Nagel and his 'like a bat': an exercise in primordial ontology, involving both conceptual clarification and observational drilling down

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[London, 2024]**



Introduction

Nagel and his 'what it's like to be a bat'

An ontology of subjectivity

Is 'what it's like to be me' a crucial marker of interiority?

The ontological ground of perceptibility itself: the 'apprehending capacity'

Markers of subjectivity and interiority

The ontological interchangeability of perceptual markers

Interiority and the 'ultimate metaphysical mystery': existence itself called into question

Summary and Conclusion

Bibliography

Nagel's 'like a bat' is 'the most widely cited and influential thought experiment about consciousness.' Daniel Dennett (1991)

Introduction

Philosophy and metaphysics are both notoriously uninformative when it comes to a plain and simple ontology of 'consciousness', and anyone studying the literature will soon be defeated by the verbiage. David Chalmers (1996) told us consciousness was a 'hard problem' – properly meaning 'hard' even to know what we're talking about - yet much of what masquerades as philosophical 'hard work' amounts to no more than convoluted attempts to marry consciousness to organic brain states, and be done with it.

It would be nice to say 'and then along came Nagel', but Nagel's intervention in (long ago) 1974 – despite being extremely interesting and provocative – is something of a lone philosophical flag in an otherwise deserted landscape; yes of course there have been tons of articles all over the place before and since, but none has quite captured the narrative in the same way.

So what exactly was Nagel trying to do? In essence, pinpointing a specific experience of human subjectivity which could act both as an insightful descriptor as well as a conclusive demarcation between subjectivity and physical objectivity, such that it would not be possible, in the pursuit of a reductionist physicalism, to dismiss the subjective experience without dismissing the undeniable evidence. The 'what it's like to be a human' experience is, in Nagel's terms, an irreducible subjective fact. And as part of his phenomenology, Nagel also made clear that human subjectivity - residing characteristically in a non-exchangeable (non-replaceable) 'point of view' – could not occupy a 'bat's perspective' without totally relinquishing its own in the process; which in turn would negate the idea of being able to know 'what it's like to be a bat'. More on all this below.

Now what are we trying to do? To begin with, we want to take a look at Nagel's key conception, to assess its value as an instance of interiority. Then we want to present an ontology of the apprehending of subjectivity and interiority, with a view to discovering if there is something like an endpoint in any exploration of subjectivity, such that it either closes in on itself as a dead end, or reveals further experiential possibilities. The idea is that insight into these realms is of great interest to anyone pursuing objective metaphysical knowledge in the cause of a resolution to the human predicament, on the road to something like ultimate fulfilment.

Nagel & his 'what it's like to be a bat'

Nagel's essay 'What is it like to be a bat?' (1974) is considered a landmark intervention in the philosophical study of 'consciousness', and is regularly referred to and discussed in writings by those who analyse such theories. So we take it as read that Nagel's essay is as good an entry point as any to use in an ontological analysis of primordial human subjectivity, with a view to then pursuing the analysis as far as we can. The idea here is that we start with a representative account of human 'interiority' and then progressively drill through key concepts until we can go no further, but hopefully striking rock somewhere along the way.

We need to say at the outset that Nagel's essay is not particularly well-argued, as well as not particularly clear, and so is easily misread, at least in part. The key point is relatively straightforward – ie that humans cannot understand (intrinsically) exactly what it's 'like' to be

a bat from a bat's point of view – but because of the somewhat rambling, non-sequential nature of the presentation (plus the fact that it seems to rest on unexamined, if widely and implicitly accepted, ideas) there is a certain doctrinaire/dogmatic feel to the whole presentation. More evidence and explanation of this later.

This means that if we're to avoid getting lost in the mists, we'll have to begin by presenting as clear a statement of Nagel's position as we can discover from quotes within his study. Only then can we attempt to drill through his ideas to what he might really be getting at.

Here are a series of relevant quotes from Nagel's article:

'fundamentally an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is like to be that organism- something it is like for the organism.... We may call this the subjective character of experience...every subjective phenomenon is essentially connected with a single point of view, and it seems inevitable that an objective, physical theory will abandon that point of view....I have said that the essence of the belief that bats have experience is that there is something that it is like to be a bat...I want to know what it is like for a bat to be a bat. Yet if I try to imagine this, I am restricted to the resources of my own mind, and those resources are inadequate to the task....My point, however, is not that we cannot know what it is like to be a bat. I am not raising that epistemological problem. My point is rather that even to form a conception of what it is like to be a bat (and a fortiori to know what it is like to be a bat) one must take up the bat's point of view. If the subjective character of experience is fully comprehensible only from one point of view, then any shift to greater objectivity - that is, less attachment to a specific viewpoint - does not take us nearer to the real nature of the phenomenon: it takes us farther away from it.'

Nagel's conception hinges on 2 key points:

1) that attempts by humans to put themselves into a 'bat perspective' (or into any non-human perspective) are doomed from the outset because it is ontologically impossible for one species to occupy the exact point of view of another; and

2) that the distinctive experience of 'what it's like to be something' is the essential experiential subjectivity of a conscious creature, whatever that creature might be. In other words – combining the two points - if I want to know subjectivity, I must have the experience of what it's like to be that particular creature, and experience it from its unique point of view.

Nagel's proposition has a certain cogency to it in loose, everyday terms, based on the idea that my subjectivity is categorically fenced off from the subjectivity of others, so I can't know their 'interiority' in that same way that I know my own. And it 'sort of' follows from that that the 'essence' of my interiority is what makes me ultimately (and intimately) me, and that my experience of this interiority is exactly and utterly 'what it's like' to be me, and not anyone else.

Hacker (2012) thinks he's able to demolish all this with a close semantic analysis of key terms (a la Wittgenstein) coupled with the kind of conceptual housekeeping familiar to those in the analytical tradition. As he sees it, it all boils down to the misuse of words and concepts by people like Nagel (and the community engaged in 'consciousness studies'), and simple analytical clarification would have revealed to Nagel that he is referring to things which don't actually exist, and this in turn means his whole intervention is specious nonsense, best characterised as a 'sad and sorry' affair.

An ontology of subjectivity

Yet there is another way to engage with these phenomena, and it's infinitely more interesting than going the route of either semantic analysis (Hacker) or declaring (somewhat by decree) that a 'what it's like' is the essence of human subjectivity (Nagel). An ontological phenomenology of the experience of subjectivity will show us not only what our supposed 'subjective interiority' amounts to in the long run, but as we drill through it, it will also indicate where the ultimate metaphysical mystery (for us as human beings) lies.

Where exactly to start? We can go back to Nagel and try to find an experiential point of reference which would – somehow – locate us in the (or in 'an') essence of subjectivity, such that we could confidently declare that this is what not only makes 'me' 'essentially me', but by extension, also makes 'you' 'essentially you'. Is there such an experiential phenomenon?

In truth, yes. I can easily switch, in the course of ordinary experiencing, from focusing, in attention, on 'stuff in general' (ie anything not seemingly related to me at all) to an intimate 'sense of myself', and in doing so, move from a sense of not needing to care about the objects of my attention, to a sudden sense of self-related vulnerability, in which my experiential openness suddenly requires a vigilance on my part, even if not under any apparent immediate 'threat' I could identify. This sense of 'intimate me' can drift from one apparent vulnerability to another, and can differ widely from one individual to another, but is not fictional or imaginary, even if its locational flexibility can surprise the person who supposedly 'possesses' it. In other words, I can never be sure when I will suddenly feel vulnerable and perhaps 'brutally exposed'.

Is this sense of self-intimacy and intimate vulnerability the essence of 'what it's like' to be me? Partly, but not completely. Hacker says that there's no such experience as 'what it's like to be' a something, but this is simply mistaken; there can be moments in one's experiential progression when one is struck by the peculiarity and singularity of one's particular incarnation as a certain type of creature – in this case, as a 'human being' - (as opposed to a different type of creature) at that moment, and that apprehending of one's incarnational singularity (nothing whatsoever to do with transmigration and the like) is exactly what it means to 'be like a particular something', as opposed to being like something else.

Furthermore – if you live with animals – dogs, cats, cows, whatever – you are also (very often) a party to instances when these other creatures reveal to you 'what it's like' to be them in their particular animal-ness, and it doesn't involve anything supernatural or psychic – the situation itself explains itself there and then, in the moment - without unusual or extraneous input from the imagination: you just 'get it' as it happens. You can, for example, tell an expectant dog that it's going to the beach, and the dog will immediately tell you 'it can sometimes be great just to be a dog!' Same thing when a dog is about to be let off a leash in a park. One doesn't (need to) go into an unusual and special thought mode – it's abundantly clear from 'signals' apparent in the immediacy of the situation itself. One reads the situation as it happens, and this does not involve the imagination or uncalled-for empathic narcosis: it's just absurdly obvious: you know what an animal is thinking.

Theoreticians who deny the actuality of this kind of commonplace and patently obvious 'situational reading' might think they do so in the name of 'clarity of thought' and a more 'perspicacious and objective reality', but in fact they are just denying themselves access to an entire experiential realm; nothing to do with subtlety or special powers: merely the ability to access ('read') certain situational information.

Is ‘what it’s like to be me’ a crucial marker of interiority?

But we’re drifting off the point, which is to establish whether or not ‘what it’s like’ to be something is a crucial marker of our subjectivity and interiority; and if not, what would be?

It would be useful at this stage to dive into an elemental ontological examination of subjectivity and interiority, to see if we can find sure footing in what ordinarily (very) swiftly collapses into semantic confusion. This is primarily because philosophical and scientific ontology is not based on direct observation, but rather in conceptual schema, and this invariably resolves itself in complex and worthless wordplay rather than in promoting clarity and an objective understanding.

If we return to everyday attentive awareness, we can examine a variety of simple thoughts and perceptions for elemental perceptual markers which would indicate ontological differences between one type of perception and another. The keyboard on the desk in front of me is (currently) perceived as external to me, as is the wider office space surrounding it. Something on the computer screen could trigger a series of thoughts – some of which might be memories; others might be planned intentions – and these thoughts would, if some additional prompt arose, be classified by me as perceptually ‘interior’, although ordinarily I wouldn’t feel the need to resort to such a classification, as my thought process proceeds in an unexamined (seamless) modality, moving from ‘inner’ to ‘outer’ and back again, endlessly, and without the least difficulty.

Similarly, perception moves constantly from sense perception to ‘thoughts about’ sense perception and back again all the time, with no special effort required, and no sense of astonishment or surprise. Interestingly though, close examination of the flow of my perceptions can often reveal a certain momentary confusion – at any one time – between what I think I perceive sensually, and my thoughts about what I perceive sensually; and if I want clarification as to which state exactly – inner (thought) or outer (sense perception) – I am ‘in’, I may have to wait a moment for the perceptions to steady themselves in attention and then ‘inform me’.

But if – for the sake of ontological reflection – I decide to examine my thoughts for categorical (classificatory) markers, I can, with not much effort, see that any schema that I might deploy in this regard is not entirely phenomenological, in the sense that it relies in part on a template based in intellectual abstractions, and with it obviously the application of artificial descriptive identification labels. In other words, for example, when I have a memory of a dream, my perception that it is a memory of a dream is instantaneous, but does not come with an intellectually-based ‘word label’ attached – it simply reveals itself to me as (as it were) ‘this is a memory of a dream’.

You could say, of course, that resorting to an intellectual template for classificatory purposes – correctly or incorrectly, accurately or inaccurately – is itself an aspect of phenomenological perception; and this is true insofar as we’re not talking about ‘accuracy’ here, but instead concentrating on raw perceptual data.

The ontological ground of perceptibility itself: the ‘apprehending capacity’

Hopefully we have presented sufficient evidence at this stage to make the really interesting leap to a perspective based in or on the ontological ground of perceptibility itself, namely the apprehending capacity – which we all possess – which apprehends (somehow) the ‘stuff’ (whatever it might be, mental or physical), and which then presents it – wholly comprehensively, even if confusedly and uncertainly – to us as the ‘experiencing subjects’. There is of course a deeply paradoxical element to this – and to this description – which we can mention in passing, but which would be well beyond the scope of this article to explore in detail: close examination of our perceptual ‘selves’ as subjects and inheritors and appraisers of our own experiencing are themselves presented to us as items of perception, ultimately perceived and presented to us by the apprehending capacity, which itself is not in any way directly perceived ! In other words, for me to be a ‘self’ in the first place, I have to perceive myself (somehow, as a mental (image) percept as a self – I have to be presented to myself as a ‘self’ – otherwise I would have nothing whatsoever to refer to as the self that I supposedly am.

So if the ‘apprehending capacity’ – that which presents me (including presenting ‘me’ as ‘a me-self’) with information as to what I’m experiencing at any moment – is that which informs me ontologically of the difference between ‘inner’ (interior) and ‘outer’ (external to me), what are we to make of the entire debate so far? Crucially, that subjectivity and objectivity are not absolutes, but merely ontological categories presented to us through primordial perceptions which ordinarily we treat reverentially in common discourse; meaning that in everyday life, a person who is unable to distinguish – to a required, societally acceptable level – the difference between inner thoughts and outer realities is going to find life extremely ‘hard to negotiate’.

All of which also means that, for the purposes of common discourse, interiority and externality – presented to us in normal experiential apprehending - as primordial and seemingly absolute elements of experience – given their seemingly ultimate groundings of our everyday experience, can’t meaningfully be either ‘dismissed’ or ‘explained away’ without causing ordinary discourse – even in their advanced modalities such as ‘science’ or ‘philosophy’ – to descend into unhinged (ungrounded) waffle and nonsense. In other words, we depend – for commonsense discourse and communication – on the primordial categories presented to us in ordinary, everyday experience; subjective interiority and objective externality are non-negotiable.

We need to stress here that we are talking about experiential subjectivity and objectivity in the context of normal, ordinary, everyday life – including possible extremes – and this has nothing whatsoever to do with either altered states of experience, or abnormalities. Of course, should our apprehending capacity present us with possibilities – theoretical or actual – which transgress the boundaries of normality, we might well want to try to find a way to integrate them with normality, or to attempt to explain their relevance to normality itself – but this would not, as it were, excuse that experiencing subject from the need to explain how these ‘transgressive’ (nothing to do with sexuality) experiences related to our primordial ontology of normality, based as it is on principal elements such as ‘subjectivity’ and ‘objectivity’.

Markers of subjectivity & interiority

This being true, how do we assess Nagel’s ‘what it’s like’ marker of subjectivity and interiority? Having granted that we do have such experiences, do they represent a key element in an intimate interior ‘me-ness of me’? Is it possible for me to get ‘closer’ to myself than an experience of my ‘me-ness’? And if so, what sort of an experience would that be? Would we be able to describe it?

We can try a simple thought experiment: clearing the mind, as it were, and then asking oneself, which thought (or mental experiential image) most conclusively captures my sense of my innermost self? My attention immediately turns to scan, as it were, the 'screen of possibilities within', and soon alights on my thought of 'innermost me-ness', and this thought (image) becomes – as I hold it in attentive focus – infused with its sense of 'my me-ness'. How do I know that this is what it claims to be? There's no way of referring this to another party (or person) – it simply exists as a form of self-declaration. But is it as far as I can go in pursuing interiority?

Interestingly, if I pursue the idea of getting as close to myself as possible, I notice that none of these markers of interiority is any closer to a 'mysterious something' ('my me-ness' or similar?) than one another; and in a peculiar way they are ontologically (in terms of their apprehended 'form') merely apprehended thoughts - no different in this respect one from another - and they only reveal themselves as special markers of interiority through their content; in other words, no thought of me-ness is closer to me than anything other that I might apprehend; it only seems/appears 'closer' because it tells me it is.

Which puts us in an odd situation, ontologically. We're apprehending different kinds of thoughts all the time – from memories, to dreams, to memories of dreams, to ideas, to plans for the future, etc, on and on – yet the difference between one thought and another is not marked (or identified) by a formal difference - all thoughts are thoughts, after all – but by its content. All thoughts are ontologically just items in our screen of 'thought apprehending', and only differentiate themselves by content; a memory thought is not the same as an expectation thought, thanks to its having a different type of content.

So, to summarise: we have sense perceptions – apparently 'external' to our interiority – and we have thought perceptions (thoughts) – apparently 'internal' to us as apprehending and perceiving beings; and, as 'internal', apparently more intimate and essential to our beinghood than our apparently external perceptions.

The ontological interchangeability of perceptual markers

And this brings us on – directly – to the question as to whether or not our perceptual markers – ie those elements of our perceptions which tell us what kind of perception (internal, external, present, past, changeable, whatever) they are – are fixed and immutable, or perhaps merely circumstantial, meaning only momentarily fixed, and therefore subject to change or substitution. In other words, having established that, for example, thought perceptions all share a certain minimal formal fixed similarity – as apprehended items in our 'thought apprehending 'realm'' - can we say the same about any aspect of the content of these apprehendings?

While it's undoubtedly true that at the moment of apprehending it a thought may declare itself to be 'fixed, immutable and of cosmic importance', we know from reflection that thoughts can lose their immediacy as well as their value over time, and something of apparently 'cosmic importance' can be redesignated 'very trivial and forgettable' in the light of further experience. So is there any aspect of thought that couldn't be substituted for another aspect, and even its very opposite?

The truth is, the content of thought apperceptions is ultimately fluid and malleable, and anything can become anything else. Simple reflection will demonstrate this; think of any seemingly immutable observation and belief, and then replace it with its opposite; anything, no

matter how unlikely, can somehow turn out to be the case: no apperception is anything other than momentarily fixed.

There is even a more important aspect to any primordial ontology of any and all perceptual apprehending, and this is the simple fact that all of our perceptions – mental and physical – are external, as it were (meaning utterly dependent on the capacity for their ontological status), to the apprehending capacity itself, rendering ‘internality’ and ‘externality’ somewhat circumstantial and provisional. (We can save that discussion for another day.)

What does all this tell us about our quest for an innermost (Nagel-type) interiority and the ultimate philosophical / metaphysical mystery? Well; we’re getting there – only a few steps to go.

If any ‘thought marker’ can be replaced by any other, it means that what appears to be ‘a fixed’ something/anything in the moment is, as the descriptor say, only momentary – however long that moment might last – and could potentially be replaced by anything else. So it won’t make ontological sense to declare – immutably and dogmatically – that any particular chosen or arbitrary set of descriptors or conditions are ontologically necessary accompaniments for an experience of innermost subjective interiority – anything could trigger (or accompany) an experience of subjective interiority or subjective vulnerability: it is the experience of innermost-ness which declares and validates itself, not its circumstances. Yes of course – given the way humans normally experience things – certain circumstances are more likely to trigger a sense of subjective interiority than others – solitary confinement, for example – but it could just as easily be triggered by immersion in a large crowd.

So while we accept the validity of their being a distinctive experience of the sense of ‘what it’s like to be a human’ as well as a distinctive sense of ‘what it’s like to be me’, they would need to be accompanied by a slightly different sense of ‘this is my innermost sense of me as me’ to reach the fullest experience of interiority, above and beyond a mere ‘sense of self’.

Interiority & the ‘ultimate metaphysical mystery’: existence itself called into question

Now for the hardest part: locating, identifying and describing the ultimate metaphysical mystery, namely the mystery of existence itself. There is a further aspect to any deep sense of self-interiority, in which I, as it were, appear to myself as an incarnate being, and this is the sense of the existential strangeness of my being an ‘existent’ at all, as if my very existence calls itself into question by its very existence. And this ‘calling itself into question’ – my self-perplexity at existing – doesn’t of itself point directly towards a worldly (ie scientific) explanation of itself – my self-mysteriousness feels self-contained and self-sealed, and somewhat peculiarly detached from the rest of my experiencing. And to the extent that I focus on my ongoing experience of existential self-recollection, the sense of the weirdness of my experiential existence only increases.

Is this sense of existential weirdness a ‘necessary outcome’ of the type of self-recollection we’ve described here? Clearly not, otherwise it would be better known, and would be more likely presented as a better existential marker of human interiority than a mere ‘sense of self’, as in ‘what it’s like to be me.’ Because if we stick to a definition of consciousness = responsiveness, we could accord a single-cell organism as having an (extremely primitive) ‘sense of self’, otherwise why do such creatures always respond to their environment?

So any experience of my innermost subjective interiority can tip over, or expand, into a kind of recollective perplexity as to the mystery of existence itself, as instanced by own singularity. It's not that I elevate myself into a special being – ordinary life demonstrates that to me every day – it's that if I drill through my interiority to its core I discover a mystery that is experienced as underlying (or calling into question) all of existence, not merely my own. More puzzling still, this ultimate mystery calls itself into question even as it declares itself 'unfathomable' and 'impenetrable' and 'ungraspable'. The truth is, this mystery presents itself as the 'essence of all mysteries' in its mysteriousness.

The perplexity of this 'ultimate mystery of mysteries' has nothing whatsoever to do with physical scientific 'how?' or 'why?' questions, which could (theoretically) be answered according to one paradigm or another; the mystery of mysteries calls in question everything – repeat everything – including itself, and the idea of resolving it by reference to some sort of intellectual template – however complex and profound – simply misrepresents the level of ontological interrogation required. If the intellect itself is called into question – at the furthest conceivable ontological level - what sense does it make to think in terms of yet another intellectual answer?

Summary & Conclusion:

We do know what it's like to be us as individual human beings, and we also share 'what it's like-ness' with other creatures, and on occasion – as our perceptions tell us - we can know what it's like to be them. But 'what it's like-ness' is not the last word on interiority – that has to be my inner experience of 'the me-ness of me', and beyond that, the mystifying mystery of existence itself, as instanced by me and my recollected experience of interiority.

Provocatively, but undeniably, all of this (and more!) is exterior to my apprehending capacity, without which I wouldn't / couldn't know any of it. And even worse, any and all of the perceptual markers which indicate to me (through my apprehending capacity) what it is I am perceiving and thinking at any time, could be replaced by their complete opposites, and therefore have only momentary validity as fixed (seemingly immutable) realities.

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